DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 943 FL 018 925

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TITLE Francais: Langue de specialite: Gearing Commercial French for the World of 1992.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 7p.; In: Proceedings of the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communications for World Business and the Professions (8th, Ann Arbor, MI, March 30-April 1, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; College Second Language Programs; Course Content; Curriculum Design; Educational Needs; *French; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Languages for Special Purposes; Second Language Instruction; Specialization

ABSTRACT

In the area of business-related language training, the United States lags behind Europe, where graduate business schools require at least one foreign language with business proficiency for graduation. In most United States institutions, the long-standing policy of departmentalization and a perceived dichotomy between the humanities and traditional business areas persist. Curricula in commercial French should be redefined and geared toward the professional rather than the service sector. Textbooks must address economic analysis, issues of terminology, and government regulation. Instruction should incorporate presentation skills, simulation of negotiation, and sensitization to nonverbal behavior and corporate culture. At the intermediate level, discussion should incorporate analysis of organizational charts, business card use, and culture-based differences in presentation modes and market strategies. An undergraduate or graduate program could include rotating semester courses in which a single specific economic or technical field is emphasized. Socioliterary and historical courses are also useful for developing an understanding of French corporate culture. Debunking stereotypes and adapting French communication skills to concrete transactional situations will allow Americans to deal successfully in all French-speaking areas of the world. (MSE)

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FRANÇAIS: LANGUE DE SPECIALITE:

GEARING COMMERCIAL FRENCH FOR THE WORLD OF 1992

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"Français: Langue de Spécialité":

Gearing Commercial French for the World of 1992

Although my French colleagues whom I am honored to share the podium with today have informed me that the term "langue de spécialité" is no longer fashionable in France, as being too narrowly focused on specific semantic concepts, yet I chose it as part of the title because it offers a contextual spectrum beyond commercial French encompassing the terminology and culture of telecommunications/international media, computerization, financial/economic and legal modes of expression.

How we define "Le Français des Affaires" for today's American undergraduates, graduate business students and corporate managers is a key issue as we reevaluate the subject's methodology, context, and audience in light of internationalization of American business studies and the increased needs in international market competency. Since 1981 the success of such annual conferences, the increased enrollment in French departments offering commercial French courses, the seminal support, testing procedures and "stages" offered by the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry, textbooks, documentations and publications written by specialists in the field[1] have clearly established the legitimatization of Business French courses and programs in French department curricula. Yet despite this documented validation, administrators hesitate to increase funding for such programs and contacts between French department courses, and economic, accounting/business departments and international graduate business programs remains fragmented and limited to a few institutions. The interdisciplinary focus developed at Eastern Michigan, the Lauder Institute at Wharton, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, the American Graduate School of International Management (Thunderbird), the University of South Carolina, Clemson, are exceptions to the continued policy of departmentalization and a preconceived dichotomy between the traditional humanities and business areas.

In this domain the United States lags badly behind Europe where graduate business schools require at least one, if not two foreign languages with business proficiency for graduation. Internationalization of the business curriculum promoted by government legislation and by the efforts of the American Council of Graduate Business Schools has to include a language component in order to train a linguistically and culturally competent business community capable of conducting transactions, negotiations, contractual discussions in the European Economic Community of 1992.

Why shouldn't these business schools be able to avail themselves of programs, materials and faculty expertise developed in their own campuses and undergraduate language departments? At present in French business courses we teach business language, we

do not necessarily teach the students how to conduct business in the language: the two are not synonymous.

Commercial French is often sidetracked by its image of a course for future bilingual secretaries. It is therefore essential to redefine it as Economic French geared toward the professional rather than the service sector. American corporate managers, international litigators, present and future specialists in cross-border credit leasing, mergers (OPA), French-American copyright, broadcasting and media negotiations, capital markets, will need an in-depth knowledge of specialized French terminology as well as the cultural, behavioral socioeconomic context of their field of expertise in order to successfully compete for their share of a European market in which France will be a predominant linguistic presence. These specialists will have at their disposal bilingual/native secretarial staff, but they are the ones who will have to attend the meetings and analyse confidential materials: audit reports, telecommunication memos, financial statements.

The primary information offered to our students in textbooks published by Didier, Larousse, Hachette between 1978 and 1984[2] is no longer sufficient beyond a basic first-semester introduction to commercial vocabulary. Economic analysis of French banking, stock markets, key industries, the issues of linguistic politics[3] (the concept that, in France, financial/economic terminology is dictated by government decrees: commissariat de la langue française, Arrêté du 18 février 1987 relatif à l'enrichissement du vocabulaire economique et financier)[4] government regulations and control must be presented and discussed as background material.

Language methodology geared toward the future MBA student has to incorporate presentational skills, simulation of negotiation sessions, sensitization to French/American non-verbal behavior and corporate culture. Supranational in finance, multinational in commerce, must translate to interdisciplinary in academia. Textbooks are often outdated by the time they appear in print. Therefore, in order to provide the students with accurate updated materials on the EEC, the European Currency Unit (ECU), political rhetoric, articles preferably from the financial press must be made available: Expansion, Nouvel Economiste, Figaro (Fig/Eco), Le Monde, Banque, Dynasteur, International Economy, EuroMoney, Wall Street Journal, as well as documentation are invaluable institutional tools for models of letters of credit, balance sheets, telexes and the actual language used in transactions.

At the intermediate level discussions should incorporate analysis of organizational charts, business card usage, differences in presentational modes in terms of language, digressions, emphasis on semantics and format. Where the Americans approach a business transaction in terms of initiative, applicability and result-oriented evaluation and research, the French offer theoretical initiative, in-depth research and potential applicability.

Discussions and readings on cross-cultural market strategies should include specific examples such as the Waterman/Gillette merger and subsequent resignation of the French CEO, the problems faced by the Printemps store launching its merchandising concepts for the U.S. market, the Hachette/Grolier negotiations and mergers.

An undergraduate or graduate program could be devised in which each semester one course is offered, on a rotating basis, on a specific economic/technical field: French telecommunications, marketing strategies, intercultural negotiations, law, in which the vocabulary, syntax, history, etymology, cultural refential content is analysed in depth.

With the support of the French government business videos and realia are being developed to meet these needs. Business French videos for American management would present scenarios on joint financing negotiating sessions for launching an American product in France, presentation of business communication inside and outside the boardroom. These materials will broach the subject from the perspective of the professional versed in his/her field who now needs to acquire cross-cultural knowledge. Courses for this type of audience, also applicable for advanced economic French courses in undergraduate programs, such as the one currently given at Barnard College, should include a strong sociocultural component. Socioliterary and historical courses are the basis for an in-depth understanding of French corporate culture and attitudes. Courses on "Le Financier dans le théâtre du 18eme siècle," "La thématique economique chez Balzac et Zola," "History of 19th Century French Banking" have an essential role in intercultural attitudinal development and understanding. After all, France is the only nation where the offices of the Ministry of Finance are located in the heart of the national museum: Le Louvre.[4]

Debunking stereotypes, the John Wayne/Maurice Chevalier syndrome, adapting French communication skills to concrete transactional situations will allow Americans not only to deal successfully in France but in all French-speaking areas of the world: a Francophonie in action rather than theory. American corporations affected by the global market are no longer limited to the Fortune 500. The impact on small/midsize (PME) companies in the United States and Europe will continue to increase. Industrial plant and equipment investment in Europe since 1986 has increased 39%, and will continue to grow. American and French corporations and financial institutions are seeking more and more to place international executives, (cadres internationaux), in order to establish exchanges between their home office and their foreign subsidiaries.

George Shultz wrote in International Economy:

"Increasingly, wealth is becoming intangible; exchange,

> instantaneous, labor, mental. Increasingly, success depends on how fast ideas are put into practice...We must build coalitions of common sense. We need patience, discipline and staying power. We need openness, and the swiftness to seize the opportunities openness creates." 5

Let us, as academics, apply these precepts to our future French language training as part of a policy of engagement and cooperation.

NOTES

1. David O'Connell "Le Français des Affaires" American Association of Teachers of French Bulletin 10, II (1984), 3.

Patricia Cummins, "Commercial French in the United States: A Summary of Survey Results" French for Business and International Trade IV, 1 (Winter 1989)

2. G. Mauger, J. Charon, Le Français Commercial, Manuel (Larousse, 1975).

M. Dany, A. Reberious, Le Français des hommes d'affaires (Hachette, 1975).

M. Dany, I. de Renty, Le Français de la Banque (Hachette, 1978).

3. Lois Vines, "The Politics of Language Legislation: A Question of Consumers' Rights in France," French Politics and Society, Harvard University (January, 1988), 24-27.

4. Richard Bernstein, "Finance Ministry is Staying Put in the Louvre," The New York Times (August 2, 1987), p. 19.

5. George Shultz, "My Final Word", The International Economy, (January/February 1989), pp. 26-29.

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Date Filmed

March 29, 1991